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ABSTRACT

Advice on developing a consulting practice is offered to academicians who are interested in initiating part-time consulting work while maintaining a primary focus on teaching. Steps in this process are assessing one's marketability, contacting the agency, developing a project work plan, and completing the work. Marketable skills include: conducting planning studies; developing a survey instrument or sampling; grantsmanship skills; and substantive knowledge or expertise in a specific subject area that can help agencies provide services, improve client compliance, or improve outcomes. The following aspects of applied research must be acceptable to the academician: use of less than reliable data; loss of control over the study's focus; competing interests regarding the outcome; problems that often cannot be clearly defined; and providing practical advice rather than qualified research findings. The individual must also establish time availability for consulting. Networking is the process of developing and using contacts and is necessary for increasing understanding of the system and maintaining links with agencies that need consulting services. Defining a work plan includes written specification of the consultant's role for the agency, time frame of the work, agency input, and reimbursement. Tasks involved in completing the work include developing and maintaining a working relationship with the agency staff and followup to ensure full use of the consultation product. (SW)

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ACADEMICIANS AS CONSULTANTS: TRAVELLING BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

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INTRODUCTION:

Public and private non-academic settings provide interesting and challenging problems for the academician. Such settings give the academician an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to real societal problems and to use research findings or test methodologies in a realistic setting. In return, the academician learns how agencies function and is exposed to new problems. This experience proves quite valuable in the classroom, allowing information to be presented to students with far more practical and realistic orientation. There are, of course, more immediate financial rewards for part-time consulting. Although one is not likely to become wealthy, it is possible to obtain summer funding and significant income supplementation. Finally, part-time consulting provides contacts and career options for the academician and his/her students in times of difficulty in the academic market.

This paper is addressed to those individuals in academic positions who are interested in initiating part-time consulting work while maintaining a primary focus on teaching. I am assuming that most of you have little or no consulting experience and are seriously considering becoming more involved in public sector consulting. My purpose is to provide an overview of the steps involved in developing a consulting practice and give more specific advice on initiating this practice.

These steps are: Assessing your marketability; Contacting the agency; Developing a project work plan; and Completing the work.

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Assessing Your Marketability

Three broad issues may be identified in this initial stage: identify your marketable skills, determine what you are interested in doing, and establish the degree of your availability. Your first task is to identify the skills you possess that would be of use to an outside agency. If you have a professional degree or teach in a professional degree program, then you could be hired to perform tasks that practicing professionals in your field generally carry out, assuming that you are adequately licensed or certified. As a planner, for example, I have been asked to do several long range institutional planning studies for a local 1,200 bed hospital system. Other teaching professionals such as physicians, attorneys, architects, and social workers have obvious skills that would be of value to agencies.

Academicians in disciplines not oriented toward professional practice need to identify creative uses of substantive knowledge and/or methodological skills. For example, a social scientist with skills in experimental design and statistics can assist an agency in developing a survey instrument or sampling procedure. That same individual may provide assistance in analyzing available agency data to document accomplishments or identify trends. Specialized knowledge of methodological studies can aid agencies in identifying sources of error in their own studies that have led to unexpected results. Grantsmanship skills may also be marketable, as agencies are seeking additional funding to extend their services.

Substantive knowledge, or expertise in a specific subject area, provides another source of potential consulting. Specific understanding of the aging process can aid in identifying predisposing or intervening factors that may inhibit the use of new services. Knowledge of current research findings may help local agencies deal better with some of their current responsibilities, improve client compliance, or change programs to improve outcomes.

Understanding program operations, administrative procedures, or financing can also provide consulting possibilities. Due to pre-academic experience in a planning agency, I developed an intimate understanding of the Certificate of Need process in South Carolina. As a result of that knowledge a local group of physicians and developers hired me (after I left the agency) to assist them in writing a Certificate of Need application.

A more active approach is to consider what specific problems exist and where you can help. For example, what agency programs could be improved with better data collection or analysis? It should not be too difficult to identify these problem areas since publications of both public and professional circulation continually bemoan program failures. State and national professional societies are probably the most fertile sources of problems experienced by agencies in a specific field. Improving methodologies, dealing with funding cutbacks, and developing public awareness are just a few such issues. Having developed some understanding of agency activities, you could then consider what agency positions you could fill. Perhaps more to the point, what functions and tasks performed by agency staff would you be interested in doing yourself? In short, you probably have certain skills or knowledge based on your professional training or experiences that would be sought out by agencies once you made your presence known.

This raises an important question: are you really interested in working on agency problems in an applied way? Working outside an academic environment can be stimulating, but there are several aspects of applied research that you must be willing to accept. These aspects include:

1) Use of available data that may be far from reliable;

2) Loss of control over the study's focus;

3) Competing interests regarding the outcome;

4) Problems that often cannot be neatly defined, let alone solved;

5) Working directly with non-academic professionals who are not interested in the theoretical aspects of your work; and

6) Providing practical advice rather than qualified research findings.

To be at all successful, you must be interested in and able to accept these conditions. In addition, consider your institution's attitude toward non-academic work in tenure and promotion decisions. While publication of applied research is certainly possible, are such publications viewed as favorably as "pure research"? If your outside work results in no publication at all, will this public service effort be recognized by the university? Given a clear understanding of what you can do for one or more agencies, it is necessary to consider your availability outside of your academic position's requirements. Of concern here is how much time is available, when that time is available, and your employer's attitude toward part-time faculty consulting. In general, an academician's time is most available in the summer, although some free time for consulting can usually be found during the academic year. The university's policy towards consulting and applied research is critical. Universities demand faculty productivity outside the classroom in the form of publications, research, and/or public service. The relative emphasis of a specific department relates to the nature of the university's mission and academic discipline. As a land grant institution, Clemson's policy explicitly

> "encourages consulting activities, provided that they present no conflicts of interest and result in no diminution of the quantity and quality of professional services rendered to the University as part of the faculty member's normal duties and responsibilities." (Faculty Manual, Clemson University p. 111-113).

This policy derives from the desire of the University to help serve the needs of the state and recognizes the importance of bonafide consulting for the professional growth of the faculty.

Regardless of the favorable nature of the institution's consulting policy, an academic consultant might receive some criticism from his peers: practitioners in your field may feel that you are unfairly competing with them, particularly if you use relatively inexpensive student help; fellow faculty members may be jealous of your extra income, feeling that your university duties must be suffering; and the university administration may feel that you should always work through their system.

Contacting The Agency

Given a conception of what contributions you can make to an agency, a personal interest in consulting, and university approval, the next step is to make contact with an agency. I have always been contacted by an agency with a request from them to provide a professional service. This is largely due to the fact that I worked in an HSA for several years in South Carolina prior to taking an academic position in the same state. This non-academic experience has been particularly helpful in:

1. Developing an understanding of various agencies' operations and concerns from their perspective;
2. Developing a realistic and applied approach to problems;
3. Identifying possible topics of interest to the agencies; and
4. Developing a network of contacts within the state.

By developing in these four areas, you will be asked for help by agencies. Above all else, a consultant must provide a service that the agency perceives to be useful: realistically solving an agency's problem in a way that is acceptable to the agency and its political environment. This requires the consultant to understand the agency's situation from both overall and agency perspectives. A competent academician should have an understanding of how existing programs operate:

who is involved, what problems are dealt with, what resources are available, what issues are not considered, etc. Regardless of your own professional view, you will be expected to work with the agency's perspective in mind. For example, I was hired to write a position paper by the S.C. Hospital Association on acute care bed need. It was clear that the purpose of the position paper was to protect hospital interests by proposing advantageous modifications in the state bed need formula. While I certainly tried to move the Hospital Association Planning Committee toward my own point of view, in the end the paper had to represent a position the Hospital Association could endorse.

"Networking" is the process of developing and using contacts and is necessary for both increasing your understanding of the system and maintaining links with agencies that will request your services. While networking methods used vary somewhat depending on one's personal style and position, all successful networking is based on competence, interest, and initiative.

If you feel the need to widen your understanding, review the literature in the field, then take the initiative and speak to knowledgeable people. After you have done some background reading, contact colleagues in academic settings. Seek contacts with agencies, providers, facilities, and relevant professional societies. In addition, read agency and society newsletters, and contact professional society staff members. If you are competent and show an interest in applied problems you should obtain both a realistic, current understanding and useful contacts for future work. Don't be surprised if one of the people you meet takes a special interest in your career and becomes a mentor. I would suggest that an academician entering consulting should focus his/her efforts to make contacts in a specific geographic area and subject matter. As your interests and opportunities grow, the focus of your work can expand or shift.

For graduate students who are seeking an applied focus in their work, additional opportunities are available. Clearly, substantive competence is basic for all professionals. Applied rather than purely theoretical courses should be sought after the basic theoretical core has been taken. Methodology used in the field should also be sought through coursework and applied research experience. Useful experience may be obtained through summer work with local agencies, applied faculty research projects, and work-study arrangements. This experience can also be very helpful in determining your level of interest in applied work. I would also encourage you to develop your written and oral communication skills as much as possible, especially developing an ability to present information in a succinct and easily understandable manner.

Most networking involves individual contacts and professional relationships with practitioners. Publication is another way of making contacts. If you are interested in being known by practitioners, send articles to applied journals and professional society newsletters. Participate in state, regional and national society meetings. Also, be willing to use the general interest media, commenting (if asked) on relevant issues. This can lead to speaking engagements for local service groups (eg, Rotary, Sertoma, etc) and a broad recognition of your interest and expertise.

One's professional reputation is directly developed by experience. Due to the applied, professional nature of City Planning, I have had the mixed blessing of directing several public service projects in South Carolina. These projects provide useful, realistic experience for the students and relatively inexpensive professional assistance for the client. The University encourages such projects as means of providing public service to the state. If your class does a decent job, you can expect to be contacted by other potential clients who desire similar assistance.

However, practicing members of your profession may view these projects as direct and unfair competition. So be very careful to ensure that the projects are open-ended, in that professionals will be required to complete the suggestions made by the class.

Defining a Workplan With The Agency

The third major step in the consulting process is to specify in writing the tasks that you will perform for the agency once a general agreement has been reached. This includes specification of: 1) your role and products for the agency; 2) time frame of the work; 3) agency input; and 4) reimbursement.

In understanding your role and products, be sure that you understand the final use of your effort. Are you fulfilling a reporting requirement, supplementing staff for a specific task, providing expert judgement, or providing assistance with a particular methodological technique? The format of your product must be clarified: is it a separate written report, part of an agency document, an oral presentation (i.e., testimony), or some combination. To avoid any misunderstandings, a written agreement of what is expected (including any changes) is desirable.

Similarly, the timeframe of the work is clarified. In addition to a deadline for project completion, checkpoints or milestones are quite helpful to ensure that your work is proceeding as expected in both schedule and content. The agency should also have a clear understanding of when you are working on their project; if it is during the summer you may be working full-time for them. During the academic year, it may be on a one day a week or weekend basis.

Agency input varies according to the task and styles of the agency and consultant. My preference is to provide the technical and professional expertise, having the agency provide administrative functions (typing, duplicating, supplies, etc). Thus I avoid major overhead expenses and am concerned only with the actual

professional product. It also forces the agency to share the responsibility for my tasks -- if they avoid typing my manuscripts or do not provide the data requested, then they are responsible for any delays that follow.

A very important issue to consider is the question of reimbursement and method of payment. Professions vary in terms of standard charges and methods for establishing charges. I have generally worked on the basis of an hourly charge or charge per task, which is computed directly from what I estimate the task will require in man-hours. Other approaches might be a fixed fee for a specific type of analysis, or percentage of the project cost (which is common in architectural work). Agencies often have specific regulations or policies governing consultants that cover methods and levels of reimbursement, travel expenses and mechanisms for payment. Determining your fee is by no means easy and should reflect your overhead, experience, prevailing rates, and nature of the work. Fees can be set <u>either</u> too high or too low.

A related issue is whether the project is done on a private basis or through the university. If you are doing a class project or using university resources, then the job is properly administered through the university. This forces you to work within the school's payroll system, bureaucracy, and overhead structure. My preference is to work directly with the agency on an individual basis, although I have worked on funded projects that functioned through the university. As a word of caution, special arrangements made within a state system are feasible, but require great patience. A small job done through the state system (that included both Clemson and the State Health Department) required six months of bureaucracy to receive payment for work done over a month's time.

Completing the Work

The tasks involved in completing the agreed upon workplan follow directly from the steps outlined in the previous sections. These tasks include:

1) Developing and maintaining a working relationship with the agency staff;

2) Keeping them informed;

3) Working on schedule;

4) Working competently and ethically; and

5) Follow up to ensure full use of your work.

In addition, accurate records of time worked, expenses and travel must be maintained for the agency as well as the IRS. An important factor to consider in completing the work is to seek explicitly to be of practical use to the agency. Be aware of the politics of the agency, the use to which your work will be put, and how this effort relates to other agency activities. This includes follow-up activities, assisting the agency to use your input to the greatest extent possible. You might provide additional briefings to staff or others, check the progress of implementation of your work, and generally make yourself available after the contract period has expired.

For example, after writing the CON application for an ambulatory surgery group, I worked with them for a few hours suggesting procedural, presentation, and lobbying strategies. While I probably did little more than confirm their well conceived plan, it was clear to them that I was doing everything possible to achieve the desired outcome.

Summary

I have found part-time consulting to be worthwhile, challenging, and rewarding as an academician. I perceive my primary objective in these consulting experiences to be serving the agency's needs rather than my own particular interests

or viewpoints. This approach implies that one is competent, fully understands the agency's situation, makes contacts without directly marketing oneself, and has this agency service perspective clearly in mind. While part-time consulting has its share of frustrations and at times places extra demands on an already full-time position during the academic year, I have found the opportunities and rewards of consulting to be fully worth the extra effort required.